



## **Muddy Creek Is Less Muddy Watershed Stewards: The Kelbaughs**

Just north of the City of Frederick and the Tuscarora Creek watershed, a small creek winds its way from a series of ponds at the base of the eastern foothills of the Catoclin Mountains, through small rural subdivisions and large farms toward the Monocacy River. On its way, the stream flows through LaRue and Gilbert Kelbaugh's property, a 30-acre farm on Sunday's Lane. They are determined to make Muddy Creek less muddy. And thanks to their stewardship actions, erosion is down and quality wildlife habitat is up.

LaRue's father was a dairy farmer on adjoining property and initially acquired the 30-acre farm now owned by LaRue and Gilbert. Her brother continues to farm the adjoining family farm. A sister lives on adjoining property as well. LaRue and Gilbert decided to assess their options for land management and decided against livestock farming, both being retirement age. They decided that they would like to plant some of their former sloping cornfields in trees and consulted Mr. Arnold who said that he liked the idea of growing trees.

Early on December 17th, a team of conservation partners including Moana Himes with the Soil Conservation Service, Mike Kay, MD DNR Forester, Heather Blair, Conservation Intern and Kay Schultz, Community Restoration Coordinator with Frederick County took a tour of the property with enthusiastic guidance by Gilbert and LaRue, despite the cold windy day. They were delighted to see the results of the conservation practices installed over the past eight years. They walked a path around the property, first passing between two habitats: a healthy, lush native shrub edge between the path and a mature forest area and a large meadow of native grasses on the other side of the path. Mike Kay said that the native shrub edge was one of the best established of such areas he had seen in the County, with a nice variety of native plants. To the right of the mowed path is a large, beautiful well-established field of native grasses including switch grass, Indian grass, big Blue stem and others. The Kelbaughs' perennial grass meadows were established with the help of Donnie Rohrback, DNR Wildlife Biologist. They intended to establish three large meadow areas. Two of



the three areas were originally in crops. On these two former crop fields, establishment was challenging but successful. Gilbert spot sprayed for thistle to prevent this invasive from spreading. The third field had been in hay. The existing grass cover was killed with herbicide before the planting but the planting didn't take. The same process was tried again, both spraying and planting with the same dismal result. After two thorough tries, LaRue and Gilbert decided to let the field resume its previous life as a hay field. Their two warm season grass meadows are a huge success and have created a badly needed type of habitat, rare in Frederick County.



One very significant goal of the Kelbaughs has been to reduce erosion. In past years, they saw a torrent of water come down the draw near their 100-year-old farmhouse, carrying huge quantities of soil into Muddy Creek. With the variety of practices that they have now installed, the impact of storms has decreased dramatically, as has erosion. They still work to reduce the speed of the stormwater flow coming off of their neighbor's fields.



**Here is a picture of the Fort that they have created with mulberry round wood to block and disperse the flow of water coming into their property.**

Gilbert and LaRue use native plants from a variety of sources. Initially beginning with free trees from the Arbor Society, they have used donated and purchased trees, making use of both the CREP and WHIP programs. They pay great attention to their plantings, typically walking through planting areas with their three energetic German Shepherd dogs twice each day. They have invested in machinery in order to keep tree planting areas mowed so as to reduce losses from voles and mice. Mike Kay explained that once trees reach 5 or 6 inches in diameter, the risk of mortality by such pests diminishes.



**Here is a photo of the way these small mammals “girdle” small trees, eating the bark off all the way around the tree at its base and causing it to die.**

They have established an evergreen border with native evergreens between Sunday’s Lane and their first warm season grass meadow. As the ground slopes down, the meadow ends and the field remaining in hay continues toward the draw. Along the lowest part of the property, the Kelbaugh’s have planted additional native trees and shrubs, continuing to replace any losses to voles and deer browse. They protect small trees with Tubex tree tubes. In this planting area there were several well-established persimmons.

Further down the draw toward the house, Gilbert pointed out where he and LaRue had removed multiflora rose and other invasives that had prevented access to a small stream. LaRue crawls under the plant to get a chain around its base and Gilbert pulls the rose bush out with his tractor. They have cleared much of the draw but have more to do. As they remove invasives, they are putting branches from some of their Black willow trees into the bank to get established and will be planting additional native plants in this area. In this low portion of the property, goldenrod and other native forbs were so lush this summer that they completely dwarfed the young trees. LaRue pointed out that on a hot summer day, walking into this area shaded by Silver Maples, the temperature goes way down, dramatically cooler than elsewhere on the property. It was in this area that a visitor observed a flock of Baltimore Orioles last summer!



An additional wildlife siting has included bobcat, one of which was treed by their dogs. Even bear tracks have been noted along the pleasant path where LaRue and Gilbert walk each morning and evening.

In recognition of their love and stewardship of their land and their contribution to improved water quality and habitat, Kay Schultz presented the Kelbaughs with Watershed Steward signs, one noting their Tree Planting success, the other their Wildlife Habitat Improvements. They said that they would be happy to share their experience with other interested landowners.



As Heather Blair, the young Conservation Intern on the tour said, “the Kelbaughs provide precise care and maintenance to every inch of their property. They put everything into their passion for their surrounding environment. The tree survival rate is very high and the success is easily seen. Overall, it’s an extraordinary job for a retiree and schoolteacher given the chance to beautify and enhance the land they love and stream they want to protect. “